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AUTHOR Wagner, Maryfrances
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ABSTRACT

Teachers can help students learn the art of good poetry writing in a number of ways. One is to offer students a list of poetry standards that ask students to consider the poem's conciseness, clarity of thought, and imagery; the use of nouns and verbs, and of metaphors; the sound of words; the structure, tone, and control of the poem; and the reader. Other ways are to create a list of poets to work with and to read at least one book on the craft of creative writing. The teacher can also provide the student with a list of words not to use--overused nouns, overused or opinionated adjectives and adverbs, and assorted cliches--and offer students advice from famous writers, editors, and publishers. To avoid overwhelming the beginner, the teacher should start small, focusing on one skill at a time and building upon it, while presenting models of good poetry. Finally, the teacher should encourage students to enter contests or to try publishing in a publication so they sense that they are writing for an audience other than the teacher. (HOD)

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PREVENTIVE MAINTENANCE: ESTABLISHING A CLIMATE FOR POETRY

A PAPER PRESENTED AT THE MEETING OF
THE MISSOURI ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH
LEE'S SUMMIT, MISSOURI
APRIL 20, 1985

BY MARYFRANCES WAGNER

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Maybe you've received a poem from a student that went something like this:

Life

Near the crystal clear brook
dewdrops sparkle in the rays of sun,
a butterfly dances in a field of clover.
The clouds in the sky look like cotton balls.
I can smell freshly cut grass.
The butterfly is free and so am I.

Or how about one like this:

Isn't Life Wonderful

The little fuzzy brown squirrel scampered
across the vernal green meadow new
through the green weeds and grasses
covered with crystal dew.
He ran up the gnarled old oak tree
and perched tenderly on a picturesque limb
to watch the beautiful brightly shining sun be
with the cotton-candy clouds and his
friend the butterfly.

Or maybe one more like this:

Sorrow

I stare from my window.
Tears stream down my cheeks.
I can't understand why you left me alone.
Why have you not called for weeks.
Without you my life has no meaning anymore.

I've heard teachers say that they don't like to teach poetry because of a dread of these predictable disasters. They've read one too many poems on cuddly teddy bears, butterflies, daisies and stars shining brightly. I've experienced that dread and those

disasters as well, but I decided to do something about it. I wanted to stop some of those obvious problems from ever happening; I wanted to lay some groundwork before a student ever wrote a poem. I thought of it as Preventive Maintenance, no more than we already do for our teeth by brushing and flossing them, no more than we already do for our car by changing the oil and having occasional tuneups. Why couldn't a teacher do a little preventive maintenance by establishing some understanding of contemporary poetry and avoiding some of those anticipated disasters before they ever happened.

What I want to talk about today involves what I came up with, as it can make all the difference in the end product, the assignment turned in. At least it has worked for me. Also, what I want to give you is something that you can take back with you and actually put to use in your classrooms. Even though the focus here is poetry, these suggestions work with fiction and exposition as well, and I've found that students who learn the art of what good writing is transfer those details and fresh words choices into all of their writing.

1. My first suggestion is that you OFFER STANDARDS as a goal. On the first day of class, I offer students a list of ten standards that we will strive for over the course of study. This works whether I'm teaching a semester course or a short workshop. The main thing is, I think, that the teacher and the student ought to have a concrete goal to work toward whether it be an apt, fresh metaphor, *le mot juste* or an appeal to three senses. Having set standards and a goal to work toward also

helps to make evaluation less subjective. If teachers tell students from the beginning that a poem has to have an apt metaphor that is fresh and startling and show them plenty of fresh, startling metaphors, then they do not have to feel so much like they're tearing up souls when the student turns in something contrived or trite.

Offering standards can also enable the teacher to work on one skill at a time. I like to begin with word choice and talk about what is fresh and what I mean by detail. I do a number of activities that involve paying attention to fresh word choice, and then I expose them to poems that sparkle with detail. From there I go on to imagery, metaphor, connotation, structure and sound--each a separate part with separate activities, but each builds onto the one before it.

Operating with a set of standards also allows teachers to talk with their students about what makes a poem succeed and what makes a poem fail. In his book *Introduction to Poetry*, X. J. Kennedy offers both, and for teachers who feel limited in what they know about poetry, this book is an excellent handbook, a good place to begin.

I established the standards that I use based on reading contemporary poetry, talking to poets about what a good contemporary poem ought to do, reading books on the craft of writing poetry and actually writing poetry and attending poetry writing workshops with famous poets. These are the standards that I give my students:

<u>POETRY STANDARDS OF EVALUATION</u>

1. CONCISE -- Is the poem tight, clean and free of excess words? Is every word in your poem for a reason?

2. CLARITY OF THOUGHT -- Is the poem clear to the reader? Does he know what you're trying to say? Have you tried to communicate to a large audience?

3. IMAGERY -- Have you drawn a picture with words or tried to appeal to one or more of the five senses? Imagery enables the reader to visualize or feel your poem.

4. SHOW NOT TELL -- Have you concentrated on using action verbs and concrete nouns, making your poems as specific as possible? Have you avoided using abstractions and weak adjectives? Specific detail "shows" a reader; opinionated abstractions like "great," "wonderful," "beautiful," only "tell."

5. FRESH AND ORIGINAL -- Does your poem offer fresh, unexpected comparisons, original metaphor, vivid, fresh words choice? Has your observation been precise? Have you avoided easy phrasing, the first word off the top of your head, cliches, or old ideas often heard before?

6. SOUND -- Does the poem flow naturally? Have you paid attention to what your words sound like when read aloud? Is your sound subtle but definite to a trained ear? Have you avoided forcing certain words to fit or sing songy rhyme? [I recommend students not rhyme at first. Free verse will create more natural sound and words.]

7. STRUCTURE -- Have you given attention to word placement and line control? Have you broken a line at a certain word for a reason? If you pay attention to line placement, you can control how the reader will read your poem.

8. TONE -- Are you the poet speaking? Is your attitude clear without telling your reader that you are happy, bitter, or sad? Is your connotation of words consistent throughout? Is your voice authentic? If not, your reader will not believe you. Does your tone fit the content? Don't write about death in a humorous tone.

9. CONTROL -- Are you treating a subject that you have experienced or observed? Have you avoided "bigness" and large, abstract concepts like Death, Life, and Happiness? Stick with simplicity and singleness of effect. Try talking about one moment, one event, one person, the death of an animal as opposed to generalizing about all people, life and death.

10. OVERALL -- Have you avoided being sentimental? Keep that for private poems. Appeal to your reader's emotions through images you draw and senses you evoke. Sentimentality is bad art.

2. The second point I would like to make is DO YOUR OWN

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HOMEWORK. It's important to be familiar with contemporary poets, and after looking through a few anthologies, teachers can create a list to work from. I have collected a list of over a hundred, and that certainly does not exhaust the possibilites, but for the sake of spare, I will only name a few of those I repeatedly turn to for models: Anne Sexton, Maxine Kumin, Mark Strand, May Swenson, Galway Kinnell, Charles Simic, James Dickey, Maya Angelou, Eve Merriam, Denise Levertov, Archibald MacLeish, Etheridge Knight, Adrienne Rich, W. S. Merwin, Donald Hall, Robert Bly, William Stafford, Robert Hass, Audre Lord, Dave Smith, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Gary Gildner, Louise Gluck, Thomas Lux, William Matthews, Dave Etter, John Ciardi, Karl Shapiro, Gary Snyder, James Wright, John Woods, David Wagoner, David Ignatow, James Tate, Diane Wakoski, Muriel Rukeyser, Frank O'Hara, Theodore Roethke, Margaret Atwood, Marge Piercy and Gregory Orr.

An anthology is the obvious place to start gathering poems that suit the needs of a teacher, but I think it is equally important to read books of poetry by one poet as well. Anthologies often only offer a few poems by one poet, and those may not be enough to know the poet. Those anthologies may not offer the poet's best poems either. Also, I'm not necessarily talking about textbook anthologies. Browsing in a good book store, you should be able to find a number of good collections. As I mentioned earlier, X. J. Kennedy's *Introduction to Poetry* is a good one. *The American Poetry Anthology* edited by Daniel Halpern is another good one, and when he compiled that book, all

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of the poets were under forty. *Contemporary American Poetry* edited by Donald Hall is a little paperback at an affordable price with many good poems. *The New Yorker Book of Poems* is a quality collection. There are, of course, many more, but I know these are readily available and useful.

I think it is also important to read at least one book on the craft of writing. Many teachers have had expository writing classes in college, but not classes in creative writing or specifically poetry, and, as a result, many feel uncomfortable trying to teach what they haven't done. The University of Michigan Press puts out a number of books in a series they have called POETS ON POETRY. Each book includes a collection of essays by a poet on poetry. I have found several of them quite helpful, to include the ones by Maxine Kumin, William Stafford, Anne Sexton, Robert Bly, and Diane Wakoski.

If possible, it's a good idea to take a poetry writing workshop--not one for teachers on how to teach poetry, but one taught by a poet where the teacher is the student learning to write a poem. Many colleges offer them across the country during the summer months. Trying to write a good poem shows a person how difficult it is and what it takes. If you never write a good poem, you will still have more empathy for the process and perhaps more discriminating taste in what you expect from a poem.

Poetry is, unfortunately, a neglected art, and many teachers have never even attended a poetry reading. Most cities offer at least occasional poetry readings, and the benefits of attending are twofold. First of all, the teacher can hear how

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the poet wants the poem read or sometimes a little background on the poems, and our struggling poets get a little support that they deserve and need. After all, poetry is meant to be heard.

Teachers who would like to try getting student poems published need to check into available markets for their students' age level. There are state publications just for students as well as national markets. A good bookstore sells market lists, a subscription to CODA, put out by Poets and Writers, Inc., supplies available markets, and workshops often provide market lists or places people can write to obtain them. It's a good idea, though, to remain realistic and to send poems to suitable markets. It's unlikely any beginner will publish a poem in *Poetry* or *The New Yorker*.

3. One of the most effective preventive maintenance tools I use is to PROVIDE LISTS OF WORDS NOT TO USE. This is a list of common, easy words that keep appearing in poems unless we tell them not to use them first. This list includes overused nouns: butterflies, rainbows, shining stars, roses, daisies, sad clowns, park benches, hobos, babbling brooks, rippling water, oak trees, teardrops, new-born babies, scampering puppies or squirrels, fluffy clouds, clouds like cotton balls, clouds like cotton candy, swaying trees; overused or opinionated adjectives and adverbs: glimmering, crystal clear, bright, brightly, shining brightly, gnarled, coal-black, dew-covered, vast, limitless, neverending, countless, wonderful, beautiful, exciting, gently, softly; and assorted cliches: with all of his might, beads of sweat, from head to toe, day in and day out, with great delight,

sigh of relief, she was in heaven, sang up a storm, blood curdling, smooth as silk/glass, down and out, snow-covered/topped mountains and thousands more. I have students keep a list in their journals, and we add to that list as they provide more examples. Soon they get the idea that they are not going to get away with easy phrasing, and they try not to do it. From a lack of overall exposure, though, some think something trite is fresh.

4. Sometimes students think that what they must produce is just the private notions of their teacher. Some of them believe that the standards asked of them are not universal and that they are only writing for the teacher. That's why it is important to LET OTHERS MAKE YOUR POINTS.

Offer advice from famous writers, editors and publishers. Some markets list exactly what kind of poems they want to publish. Some will include what they do not want, and what they do not want will coincide with what you have been telling them.

For example, one market listed, "We want poems rich with imagery. We want to see an image that will startle us. We do not want to see trite love poems, poems that have words in them like 'crystal' or 'cosmos' or that are sentimental." Remarks like that are worth exploring a wider audience and trying to get a poem published. Another publication writes, "We do not accept cliche verse, sexist poetry, or cute poems (overly sentimental)." Here are a few others: "We accept poetry with a new approach, haunting word pictures and significant ideas," "New metaphors, sustained metaphors, involvement of all senses, concreteness, conciseness," "No singsong rhymes and gushing," "We look for the

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immediacy of language, concrete, uncommon imagery, not statement," "What we see repeatedly and do not want is a kind of poem which can best be described as a 'beginner's poem.' It's usually entitled 'Refections' or 'Dust' or 'Spring' and has to do with death, love, etc. These are abstractions and the poet treats them in an abstract way."

Teachers can type up a few of these statments and let the editors make every point on their list of standards. Editors and publishers are not the only ones who supply tips on writing. Scholastic's annual writing contest includes a booklet of rules and instructions with the announcement of the contest. That booklet includes some editing tips addressed to the teacher: "Often the danger for young writers is their wish to make overly ambitious statements about big themes: love war, God, death. You might suggest that most stories of depth and sensitivity are written on a small scale: one character's experience of a relationship...." or " Are there weak, general words or cliches that could be replaced with more appropriate or more vivid words? Is there any unnecessary verbiage or repetition?" Although these remarks are designed for the teacher, I read them to the students.

In addition to the craft books I mentioned earlier put out by the University of Michigan Press, where poets discuss the craft of writing, WRITING magazine and LITERARY CAVALCADE often supply brief interviews with writers, who address a certain focus, the craft of writing, the importance of revision, or how to revise. For example, Maxine Kumin says, "I think that I look

for in poetry a freedom from abstraction, a focus on detail, a piling up of specifics that elicit an emotional response, a sensibility that is attractive and an attitude or worldly view that approximates or deepens in some way the reader's own appreciation." Diane Wakoski says, "'Sentimental' is the tendency to be swayed by feeling rather than reason. Certainly no poet is going to condemn passion or feeling. What he condemns is weak feeling, foolish feeling, easy feeling....The tools of any writer are image, symbol, metaphor....A poem is a story in which the images are more important than the narrative or the telling of the story. The poem is the image....When you write, the first thing you must do is develop a strong critical ability with language and its freshness. Also, be humble. Don't assume that you have something to say that others don't know...." In an interview in USA TODAY, Maya Angelou says, "...to write well means that one rewrites 20 to 50 times."

Also, many poets write poems about poetry that make some of the same points. Miller Williams' poem, "Let Me Tell You" with lines like "First notice everything," or "Use metaphors," or "Nothing is less important than a fact," is such a poem. "Unfolding Bud" by Naoshi Koriyama, "Why I Am Not a Painter," by Frank O'Hara and "The New Poetry Handbook," by Mark Strand are also poems about poetry that address what poetry should be doing.

5. At the expense of overwhelming the beginner, it is important to START SMALL, focus on one skill at a time and build. I like to begin with light, easy poems first that have a folksy

tone or a simple point. Some poets who work well for this include Mark Strand, Gary Gildner, William Matthews, Dave Etter, and Diane Wakoski.

Instead of expecting students to employ all of the standards in the first poem they write, begin by focusing on just word choice, thinking about each word, thinking in terms of fresh words. Then, grade the poem only in terms of effective word choice since that is the skill you have taught and the one they have worked on. You can mark other things so that when you come to them the students will recognize their problems, but the grade will be more objective if you only grade what you have taught.

After word choice, I teach imagery. Of course William Carlos Williams is an obvious poet to teach, but May Swenson, Maxine Kumin, Robert Wallace, Gregory Orr, George McBeth, and Galway Kinnell can also supply plenty of effective imagery. It will not take long, however, to realize that any contemporary poet relies on imagery, so there should be no problem for the teacher to find useful examples or models. When the students begin working on imagery in their poems, they must also think about effective word choice, and as you add a skill, the student is responsible for whatever has gone before--comprehensive.

As you add a skill, the student gets closer to fulfilling the initial standards so that close to the end he knows that while he is thinking about line placement and the sound and flow of his lines, he knows the poem must also employ effective, fresh word choice, imagery and metaphor. He knows he should not waste a single word but try to pack his meaning in with connotation,

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allusion or symbol.

6. I have mentioned poets that I use when teaching certain skills. This brings me to my next point: OFFER GOOD MODELS. I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to show students good models. I have never seen a student aspire to do better than the model that the teacher presents, and if you offer cliches as examples of metaphor, that's what you will get in return regardless of what you tell them: "Now this is just an example. I expect you to write one that is fresh." Why should the student outperform the teacher? Isn't the teacher the expert or at least the one who knows more than he does, so why should he come up with something that the teacher does not supply or do?

For any concept or point that I teach, I always spend time searching and reading poems until I find outstanding examples to demonstrate what I want. I also collect lines and poems that students write so that I can offer good student models. Good student models are even more effective because students know that other people just like themselves on the same level managed work like that. If we spend long enough in the classroom, we learn, generally speaking, that students never try to be as good as a professional writer, but the best student samples become the realistic model they will strive for.

So, if we want them to write apt, startling metaphors, we must give them ten or twenty examples of apt, startling metaphor. Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Maxine Kumin are masters: "The nights snapped out of sight like a lizard's eyelid, (Plath), "They come forth with all four legs folded in like a dime store

card table" (Kumin), "The night nurse is passing out the evening pills. She walks on two erasers, padding by us one by one." (Sexton). Gregory Orr, Galway Kinnell, Marge Piercy, Robert Bly and any number of other good contemporary poets will supply ample metaphors as well. It's just that with Sexton, Kumin and Plath, metaphors abound in every poem, and they always seem so fresh, apt and startling--exactly what we tell students they should be. Students will come up with some good ones too, and I carefully collect those for future examples. Here are a few:

THE KITE: FREEDOM ON A STRING -- CINDY WASHAM

I swim
through north wind pockets,
baby the sky with figure eights.
I catch air in my stomach
and float
like a leaf in a June creek--
up,
down again.
I swirl my tail,
beckon the willow
to a game of hide-n-seek.
I am your spring angel;
I am freedom
on a string.

THE LIE -- JENI CHRISTAIN

It slipped through my lips,
flew to her ears, and
embedded itself in her mind before
I could reach out
and grab it back.
The lie was a dot on a
dress of dotted swiss,
yet, she picked it out,
and like a whisper
that triggers an avalanche,
my lie caused black spots to stain
our pink and white friendship.

These girls were sixteen when they wrote these poems in class. In both cases the poems are conceits, extended metaphors.

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Here are some student metaphors within poems, "The water drips from my body, sizzling on the patio like butter burning on a hot element" (Carol Bradley), "Red and green gummi bears stick together like fused hydrogen atoms" (Kim Braden), "The fish darkly gather like the inked-in pools of a charcoal sketch" (Roybn Reade), "Dying worms are miniature contortionists writhing like medusa's scalp" (Derek McCracken), "Green lids close over yellow ping-pong ball eyes. Two eyelids roll back like garage doors as he rubs it all away with a glutted burumph" (Cherie Simmons).

7. My final point is DO SOMETHING WITH THE POEMS. Don't let the teacher become the only audience. Encourage students to enter contests or try publication. Display their work on bulletin boards and in display cases around the school where many students outside of class will read them. Display some in the school or community library. Try a class poetry reading. Try getting students to read at an event like a P.T.A. meeting or an assembly. Try putting together a classroom literary magazine if the school does not have its own literary magazine.

One value of taking poems out of the classroom is audience. When someone besides the teacher and other classmates is reading their poems, students usually think more about communicating to a wider audience, including strangers they will never meet. The writer won't be there to say, "This is what I meant to say." The writing can become more meaningful for some students as well when they have a goal. It's amazing how students will say, "How can I revise it," or "I need to revise it more," if I suggest they sent

a poem out for publication.

Offering standards, distributing lists of words and phrases for students to avoid and exposing students to as many good contemporary poems as possible should not only improve students' quality of writing but improve their overall taste in a poem. If a student looks at ten poems on the same theme, one or two of those poems will emerge as better than the rest, and if students learn what makes a good poem, they probably will start preferring the better poems and start expecting more from themselves. One could do worse than be a builder of discriminating taste.

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